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ABSTRACT

The principal of the 1990s must have a substantial understanding of school law. This paper presents findings of a study that explored West Virginia public school principals' knowledge of school law. A questionnaire mailed to 136 secondary school principals in West Virginia during spring semester of the 1995-96 school year elicited an 88 percent response rate. Findings indicate that the principals had an average preparation in school law. Overall, respondents mastered 73 percent of the material. Principals in large countries scored above average (80 percent) on the Legal Knowledge Index. Finally, a positive relationship was found to exist between legal knowledge and selected independent variables. (Contains 4 tables and 13 references.) (LMI)

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Analysis of the Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals in West Virginia

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Abstract

This study sought to determine West Virginia Public School principals' knowledge of school law. The population consisted of all public secondary school principals (N=210) during the 1995-96 academic year. A stratified random sample (n=136) was drawn to provide data for this study. Internal consistency coefficient alpha of the instrument was .7182. Principals' mean score on the legal knowledge index was 29.18 (SD=3.65). Raw scores were based on a maximum possible score of 40. The data reported in this study will serve as baseline information for developing statewide seminars and workshops for prospective secondary school principals.

Analysis of the Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals in West Virginia

A superficial understanding of school law is becoming increasingly inadequate for the principal of the 1990's. The principal's legal knowledge must go beyond a shallow, mechanical level so that fuller appreciation of liability risks can be reached. The principal's job has changed dramatically since 1969 as a result of the law's influx into the classroom (Doverspike, 1990).

Zirkel (1985) concluded, after reviewing research studies which have assessed the legal knowledge base of administrators and teachers, "educators generally evidence serious deficits in their knowledge of various school-related legal issues." The increasing litigation is at least partly due to Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, a landmark case in U.S. Supreme Court, which stated that students do not shed their constitutional rights at the school house gate. Since Tinker, the courts, especially at the federal level, have been inundated with challenges to the policies, procedures, actions, and decisions of school personnel (Reglin, 1990).

Results of a study by Reglin (1990) revealed that many secondary school principals needed to know more about the laws that govern their profession. According to Osborn (1990), Clark(1990), and Bagnato (1990), secondary school principals who had completed one school law course were significantly more knowledgeable than those with no such course work, thus supporting the idea that such education will enhance knowledge. Osborn (1990) also concluded that no significant differences based on educational level or years of administrative experience were found among secondary school principals.

To comply with the law, educators must be aware and knowledgeable of legal mandates (Washby, 1970). However, the assumption cannot be made that information is readily known by all school administrators (Hillman, 19985).

Purpose and Research Questions

This study sought to determine West Virginia Public School principals' knowledge of school law as it relates to school law training, teaching, and administrative experience, and location of selected s school communities. A review of literature revealed that no studies have been conducted in the state of West Virginia investigating the legal knowledge of secondary school principals. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the demographic characteristics (background preparation) of secondary school principals?
2. Are secondary school principals knowledgeable about legal concepts?
3. Are there differences in legal knowledge among secondary school principals in selected locale designations?
4. What is the relationship between legal knowledge of secondary school principals and selected variables (previous legal knowledge classes, teaching experience, administrative experience, selected school communities)?

Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms are applicable to this study:

Mid-Size City - Central city of a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) with the city having a population less than 6,000 people per square mile.

Urban Fringe of Mid-Size City - Place within a SMSA of a mid-size central city and defined as urban by the Census Bureau.

Large Town - Town within a SMSA, with a population greater than or equal to 25,000.

Small Town - Town not within a SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than

or equal to 2,5000 people.

Rural - A place with less than 2,5000 people or a place having a zip code designated rural by the Census bureau.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of all public secondary school principals (N=210) in the state of West Virginia during the 1995-96 academic year. The 1995-96 West Virginia Public School Directory was used to identify secondary principals from a typology with five mutually exclusive locale designations (mid-size city, urban fringe of mid-size city, large town, small town, rural town) as defined by Johnson (1989).

A stratified random sample was drawn to provide data for this study. According to Kingery et al., (1989) a sample size of 136 is needed at a 95% confidence level to represent a population of 210.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire, Legal Knowledge Index, was developed with the assistance of expert review and then piloted to establish its validity and reliability. Internal consistency coefficient alpha of the instrument was .7182. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of items requesting demographic information. The second part was a 40-item instrument developed for assessing knowledge of West Virginia school law. Construct validity was evaluated by administering the instrument to twelve graduate students and six secondary school principals enrolled in a school law seminar. These participants were not included as part of the sample for the study.

Data Collection

The questionnaire, along with a cover letter and a self-addressed envelope, were mailed to each of the 136 secondary school principals during the spring semester of the academic year 1995-96. To ensure a high return rate, the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) was utilized. The initial mailing and two follow-up mailings yielded an 88.23% (120) response rate.

A non-response bias procedure, the early/late response approach as described by Miller and Smith (1983), was used to determine non-response bias in response to each question. Since no significant differences were found between early respondents and late respondents, the data received were assumed to be representative to the sample/population (Miller and Smith, 1983).

Analysis of Data

The data were analyzed using SPSS/PC+. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, central tendencies, ranges, and correlations were used to characterize the data. Duncan's multiple comparison test was used to determine which pairs of groups (selected school communities) were significantly different.

Results and Conclusions

Demographic Characteristics of Secondary School Principals

The typical secondary school principal in this study had completed one or more classes/workshop(s) in school law, had ten or more years of teaching administrative experience, and worked in a rural community (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals

Principals' mean score on the Legal Knowledge Index was 29.18 (SD = 3.65) as shown in Table 2. Raw scores were based on a maximum possible score of 40. This finding suggests that respondents in this study had an average preparation in school law. Overall, respondents mastered only 73.40% of the material. Research by Donvanis and Brown (1995) revealed a similar finding.

Insert Table 2 about here

Legal Knowledge of Secondary School Principals in Selected School Communities

Duncan's post-hoc procedure revealed that secondary principals working in a "large town community" attained above average (80%) on the Legal Knowledge Index; however they had significantly higher raw scores (M=32) than principals working in other selected communities (see Table 3). This probably suggests that principals working in large communities are confronted with more legal administrative affairs than their counterparts.

Insert Table 3 about here

Relationship Between Legal Knowledge and Selected Variables

Correlation coefficients among dependent and independent variables are shown in table 4. The results of the correlational analysis indicate that there was a positive relationship between the variable "legal knowledge" and selected independent variables. The magnitude of the correlations indicate that the predictability of legal knowledge based upon these variables would be negligible.

Insert Table 4 about here

Educational Significance

Principals, like teachers, have legal hurdles to clear before they can be assured of success on the job. Cases in which principals are either plaintiffs or defendants are on the increase. The data reported in this study will serve as baseline information for developing statewide seminars and workshops for prospective secondary school principals. Experienced secondary school principals who recognize the need to stay up-to-date with regard to the legalities affecting the profession will also benefit from this study.

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Secondary School Principals (n = 120)

Characteristic	Secondary School Principals n	%
Legal Education		
No Legal Education	11	9.2
One class	47	39.2
One workshop	4	3.3
One class and one workshop	6	5.0
One class and two or more workshops	12	10.0
Two classes	15	12.5
Two or more workshops	17	14.2
Two classes and one workshop	2	1.7
Two classes and two workshops	6	5.0
Teaching Experience		
Less than 10 years	57	47.5
10 years or more	63	52.5
Administrative Experience		
Less than 10 years	32	26.7
10 years or more	88	73.3
Community		
Mid-size city	9	7.5
Urban fringe mid-size city	11	9.2
Large town	5	4.2
Small town	36	30.0
Rural town	59	49.2

Table 2
Frequency Distribution of legal Knowledge Scores Among Secondary School Principals
(n = 120)

Raw Score	Frequency	Percent
16	1	.8
17	1	.8
19	1	.8
20	1	.8
22	2	1.7
23	2	1.7
24	2	1.7
25	6	5.0
26	3	2.5
27	13	10.8
28	16	13.3
29	11	9.2
30	17	14.2
31	12	10.0
32	11	9.2
33	10	8.3
34	3	2.5
35	8	6.7

Note. Raw scores are based on a maximum possible score of 40.
M legal knowledge score = 29.18.
Mode = 30.00.
SD = 3.65.
Range = 19.
Median = 30.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Legal Knowledge Scores Among Secondary School Principals in Selected School Communities (n = 120)

Community	n	M	S.D.	Pairs *
Group 1 (mid-size city)	9	28.11	4.75	
Group 2 (Urban fringe mid-size city)	11	29.09	3.26	
Group 3 (Large town)	15	32.00	3.31	3-1
Group 4 (Small town)	36	29.27	3.54	
Group 5 (Rural town)	59	29.06	3.63	

Note. *Denotes pairs of groups significantly different at $p < .05$ level with utilization of the Duncan's multiple comparison test.

Table 4
Correlation Coefficients Among Dependent and Independent Variables (n = 120)

	LKS	PLKC	YTE	YAE	TYRAE	Community
LKS	1.00					
PLKC	.10	1.00				
YTE	.01	-.06	1.00			
YAE	.07	.08	-.39*	1.00		
TYTAE	.07	.01	.62*	.47*	1.00	
Community	.03	-.05	.12	-.22*	-.06	1.00

* $p < .05$

Note. Code for Variables: LKS = legal knowledge score; PLKC = previous legal knowledge class(es); YTE = years of teaching experience; YAE = years of administrative experience; TYTAE = total years teaching and administrative experience.